

## **Unity Academy: A School Anchored In A Community**

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“So what do you think?”, I ask after explaining how my school Unity Academy works alongside the community to improve outcomes for our students. The headteacher who is also a friend grimaces and shakes her head “Mo, I don’t agree, you’re being a bit naive”. “How so?” I ask, surprised that I didn’t get the praise and pat on the back that I was expecting. “Because a lot of these communities are broken and not good for our children and it is our job to save them from these communities”. Like a punch to the gut, I was speechless, but this was a formative conversation that has shaped how I attempt to convince school leaders that schools working alongside their communities can have real tangible benefits.

Full disclosure, Unity Academy is a semi-fictional school. I say *semi* because the examples I share in this article are very real. Unity Academy is an important example of what a school anchored in its community can achieve. They’re drawn from my own leadership experiences and the work I’ve done in supporting other school leaders to build stronger connections with their communities.

Unity Academy is part of the local fabric, actively driving community engagement and collaboration. And that’s where the idea of being an anchor institution comes in: schools are stable, long-term presences that can bring people together, often the largest institution and employer in a community. They are in a unique position to collaborate with local stakeholders on solutions, and drive better outcomes for the community.

### **From Fortress to Anchor**

It’s fair to say that schools can be a bit like fortresses, where the focus is keeping external influences and risks at bay and managing the culture and environment within. Understandably, as for Designated Safeguarding Lead, I can see the necessity of managing risk. However, while this may provide order and safety, it can limit the potential for meaningful, long-term engagement.

Unity Academy rejected this model, understanding that schools must be institutions that operate on reciprocity, open to understanding and accepting external influences, resources, and partnerships, whilst also offering the same back. Unity Academy holds dear the belief that education does not happen in isolation, instead their students are shaped by their experiences, identities, and the community in which they reside.

So, as an anchor institution, Unity Academy has been intentional in developing strong connections with local

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organisations and services, recognising that the school's success is intertwined with the well-being of the wider community. This holistic approach ensures that the school is not only meeting the educational needs of its students but also addressing broader issues such as social inequality, economic development, and community cohesion. By working with local health services, social care, and other community-based organisations, the school provides a network of support that ensures no student or family is left behind.

## **Community-Led and Rooted**

Cranbrook Education Campus in Exeter is an excellent example of a school that centres community engagement in its work. As a relatively new school in a relatively new town they are doing innovative work and their [EX5-Alive Community Hub](#) puts the community quite literally at the heart of the school.

Increasingly, youth centres, libraries and leisure centres are closing down and there are fewer places for people to build connection. In many communities, schools are becoming the only institution that have both wide and longstanding - often intergenerational - reach. If schools transition from operating in isolation or merely serving the community to actively belonging to it, they can sustainably enhance the environment, economy, and overall well-being in their local area.

Schools often have a shared workforce and shared families. Parents might work in another local school, children will have

siblings in feeder schools and staff may live in close proximity to students and their families. There is a need for increased joined up thinking - from calendars, curriculum planning, enrichment activities etc to transport, meal provision and safeguarding practices - as decisions made in, or challenges arising from, one school can have a real impact on other schools and the wider community.

Schools don't have to provide all these opportunities but can build partnerships and create more capacity. At Unity Academy we embrace our role as a point of convergence for a range of services and activities that go far beyond our statutory responsibilities.

Schools as a universal service have a frequency and consistency of contact with children and families that is unmatched and are best placed to know or identify the needs, both emerging and existing, of the communities. The beauty of dropping your anchor and welcoming the community on board is that it transforms the school into a dynamic hub, empowering collective growth and strong relationships making schools like Unity Academy places of diverse learning opportunities and courageous inclusion.